

Vesak Greetings to our Sri Lankan Buddhists

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Vaisākha or Wesak commemorates, as we conceive it, two major events in the life of our Master, the Buddha Gotama. Starting life as the son of down-to-earth human parents, of King Suddhodana and Māyā Devī, he is said to have been born into this world on the full moon day of the month of Vaisākha, i.e. the month of May. That was more than two and a half millennia ago. He came to be known as Siddhartha Gotama, that is Siddhartha of the Gotama clan. Everybody had to know from the pattern of his early life, even as a young boy, that he was well above the average.

We do not think there was anything strange or miraculous about his getting into *jhānas* while his father was busy with his seasonal ploughing festival. This, we believe, is what young Siddhartha had brought with him through his *saṃsāric* religious cultural development. It was glowing within him. His birth therefore marks the first glow of light on this planet, including even the realms of extra-terrestrial life. We need therefore to celebrate the event of his birth as long as this universe lasts. As to how we shall honor him, we have to determine with honesty and with devotion. Not as it pleases any one or any other.

As years passed by, remarks made by young Siddhartha clearly indicate to us the maturing of his wisdom. It does not interest us to know whether King Suddhodana, disturbed by the prediction of the soothsayers that his son would renounce the world and finally become the Buddha one day, removed from the city where he lived all indications of old age, disease and death, compelling the heavenly beings to produce them before Siddhartha to promote his renouncing the worldly life of humans.

On the other hand, in very convincing words, he himself tells us as the

Buddha that even prior to his enlightenment, while he was still an aspirant to Buddhahood, he felt and sensed the terrible predicament in which the humans of the world were plunged: *Pubbe'va me abhisambodhā anabhisambuddhassa bodhisattass'eva sato etadahosi. Kiccham vatā'yam loko āpanno jāyati ca jīyati ca mīyati ca cavati ca uppajjati ca.* [SN.II.10]. It is the deep impression that these observations had made upon him and the accompanying sensitivity to the suffering of the grieving world that drove him searching for an escape out of it. It was a man's search for the salvation of mankind, to deliver them into transcendental happiness. He boldly challenged whether there was no way out of it. *Kudā'ssu nāma imassa dukkhassa nissaraṇam paññāyissati jarāmaraṇassā'ti* [loc. cit.].

These stirrings in the heart of Sidhartha certainly were sometime before his twenty-ninth year, while he was still in the household, with a new-born son in the cradle. That tremendous spiritual urge sent him out of home, whatever your wise judgement about it may be, through country and town, searching for that state of tranquility [*anuttaram santi-varapadam pariyesamāno*]. He had to meet many a religious teacher and consult them and join many religious institutions of the land through his curiosity. But none got him near to what he wanted: *taṃ dhammaṃ analam karivā*. He left them all, courageously declaring that the way to liberation lay elsewhere: *añño maggo bodhāyā' ti.*

The skeletal figure of the Bodhisatta one sees in the famous Gandharan statue was definite proof of the failure of the method he experimented with, in spite of the halo the artists of the time had placed behind his head. It is this precisely recorded failure that made him denounce publicly in his first sermon the way of asceticism or *attakilamathānuyoga*. In this manner, he spent six long years, experimenting with a way of release and finally, following the middle path of no sensual pleasure nor extreme asceticism, gained his enlightenment. For this, he himself claims, he pursued his own analytical method and his practical adherence to the methodology of the Four Noble Truths - *tiparivaṭṭam*

dvādsākāraṃ. To know clearly what this means, study diligently the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta as students of Buddhism, not merely chanting the sutta in sing song style with your chosen choir-master monks.

The second glorious event in the life of our Bodhisatta, when he became the Fully Enlightened Buddha or *Sammā Saṃbuddha* provides us with the most supreme situation in his life to honor and glorify him. Today, there is hardly any part of the world where his word has not reached and made an impact on those who hear it. Within a couple of hundred years of the passing away of the Buddha, Emperor Asoka of India dispatched missionaries, carrying with them the message of the Buddha, to his neighbors around India, including regions like Sri Lanka and Mien Mar.

About the beginning of the Christian era most countries like Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq were flourishing Buddhist centers, centuries before the birth of Prophet Mohammed. Sculptural remains of inestimable value like the recently destroyed Buddhas of Bamiyan have astonishing stories to tell. Museums of the world, in America, England, France and many other European countries, including even India and Pakistan, preserve vast amounts of these Buddhist cultural monuments, pointing for ever, unwittingly though, their accusing finger at the criminals who brought about their destruction.

Be that what it may, what shall remain for ever in the world as a convincing civilizing force is what the Buddha said about human life and how man can make something better out of it in the areas of moral, intellectual and spiritual development. In the world today, after nearly two thousand five hundred years, the saner world is seen to be exploring newer areas of possible moral development. They brought out the concept of Human Rights. In its genesis, Human Rights were meant to enable humans to enjoy their rights, without generating mind-made Don Quixotic wind mills and pushing people of groups smaller than others to fight the larger ones on disruptive demands like self-

determination and equal rights. The world today is witnessing bitter results of these man-induced pathological states, one by one.

On the other hand, psycho-ethical corrective measures of society embodied in the concept of *pañca-sīla* which is introduced in Buddhism, if properly understood and applied, without pride or prejudice, could bring about a great deal of harmony and friendship among humans, anywhere in the world, benefiting even the animals. The respect-for-all-life concept [*sabba-pāṇa-bhūta-hitānukampī*] of *pāṇātpātā veramaṇī* of the *pañca-sīla* provides a great deal more comfort to all living things than what is provided under the first human rights principle. The *pansil-rakina*-Buddhists of Sri Lanka, together with their champions, need to know these fully well. It accords well with the modern scientific idea of Biophilia Hypothesis, safeguarding the entire ecosystem in the universe.

It is gratifying to note that there is today a return to respect of life in all forms, both human and animal, taking place globally, from Australia to America. This move is headed by renowned personalities like Bio-Ethics Professor Peter Singer of Australia with his books like *Save Animals*, *Animal Liberation*, *Great Ape Project*, and Jeremy Rifkin's *Beyond Beef / Breakdown of Cattle Culture*, and Victoria Moran's *Compassion, the Ultimate Ethic*. This is a great deal more than mere vegetarianism as practiced in Sri Lanka, quite often by Buddhists, on specified days of the week, quite often for reasons of non-Buddhist religious cults. Everybody knows about these freak patterns of religious goodness. But it is the order of the day, specially with the self-assumed metropolitan elite. Is it in any sense in the direction of Buddhist good living or a secret contract for material gain and worldly success?

Avihimsā of the Buddhist, nay of any human at that, must go much further than not eating the flesh of an animal on a single day. The world over, people are rejecting the use of all animal products like animal skins for leather goods,

animal furs for wearing apparel etc. Under circumstances like these, haven't we Sri Lankans a long way to go, if we consciously or unconsciously know that we want to be heading in the direction of Nirvana.

This same critical approach regarding Buddhist religious life in terms of all items of *pañca-sīla* is very much needed today. Honest and diligent application has to be a *sine qua non* for the growth and development of the religious culture of a people, individually and collectively. We cannot fail to mention the role the state should be playing in fostering this. In Sri Lanka today, in addition to respect for all forms of life in the hands of all religious groups, we need to seek their cooperation in two more areas where moral goodness in Sri Lanka is gone haywire.

They are sex violence in the country and the free availability of and addiction to drugs and alcohol. There is no denying that both are completely out of hand.

One final word at this time when the celebration of the 2550th year of the Buddha Jayanti is now occupying an uppermost place in the Government agenda. Religious culture in the land, together with the moral soundness that should go along with it, is in an alarming pathological state. Its devastating rapid decadence and degradation is not even known or felt by those who are responsible for its care and protection. This we make as a valid observation both with regard to the clergy and the laity. Both these groups, i.e. the clergy and the laity of the major community, namely the Sinhala Buddhists, have now to meaningfully rise to the occasion. Re-decorating the ancient monuments, even to make them look like what they were during the glory of the ancient times is not the meaningful need of the day.

During the last two or three decades, this country heard an uproar, both from monks and laymen, calling for the establishment of a society based on *pañca-sīla*. Did any one from these groups ever speak aloud about the implications of these five injunctions? In the midst of these neo-religious agitations, we have

witnessed over the last fifty years the heart rending mutilation of these injunctions in the hands of both learned and over-learned monks as well as laymen who know not even the basics of these socio-reformatory injunctions. Now to begin with the first precept of *pāṇātipātā veramaṇī*. Forgetting the total Buddhist attitude to life in the universe as in *sukhino vā khemino hontu sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhitattā*, the Buddhists, including monks of great eminence, gloat over their own discovery that the Buddha has laid no ban on meat eating. We are amused that the telescope is on their blind eye.

We have over and over again exploded the blunders of these monks and laymen in the interpretation of the third injunction of *kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī*. They condone adulterous misbehavior and sexual improprieties on grounds of consensual agreement. But in Sri Lanka, strange enough, these messages of the Devil get into the market even through once reputed publication societies. In the miserable absence in Sri Lanka of a bureau of standards for Buddhist publications, we shall patiently wait for a final judgement day.

On this vibrantly glamorous occasion of yet another Buddha Jayanti, under our newly set up government, one last item to talk about. It is about the lamentably pitiable state in our country today of what was once a grand achievement in the Buddha Sāsana, namely the regular observance of *aṭṭa-sīl* by our lay community, both men and women. I am not surprised that none of you know any thing about it being lamentable or pitiable. To be honest, none of us are anything better than lame men carried on the backs of blind men. It matters very little whether they are men or women. On this matter, neither the monk nor the layman seems to know anything better than the other.

Aṭṭa-sīl in Sri Lanka today is no more than taking the eight precepts at sun rise and terminating them in the evening, well before sun set. Any time even after the mid-day meal may be condoned. This is everybody's short-cut practice. A fantastic, undiscovered Pali word *pavāraṇā* is ingeniously, or we would rather say

fraudulently used, both by monks and the lay community to legitimize this untimely illegal abortion of the precious *aṭa-sīl*. As far as the Buddhist teachings go, we have to emphatically point out that the observance of *aṭa-sīl* must necessarily stretch over both divisions of the day, i.e. both day half [*divasaṃ*] and night half [*rattiṃ*]. We do not wish to label this mal-practice, neither as dishonesty or ignorance. In actual practice, it is both ingeniously blended in one, by both parties.

In Theravāda Buddhist countries like Burma and Thailand, the observance of *aṭa-sīl* is never vulgarized in this manner. All *aṭa-sīl* giver monks in these countries always announce to their *sīla*-takers that the observance is for a day and night twenty-four hour period [*imañca divasaṃ imañca rattiṃ*]. In the *aṭa-sīl* listing of precepts do you know what items 3, 6, 7 and 8 stand for. They all specifically pertain to after sunset behavior, whether it is your night meal or your sexual gratification. Go back to your *aṭa-sīl* giver monks and either learn from them the correct version or you teach them the correct version.

Now the current *aṭa-sīl* observance scheduled to terminate by the end of the day has to be unhesitatingly declared a vulgarized show business. Our comments and criticisms on this subject, over the last two or three decades have fallen on deaf ears, of monks both senior and junior, and of lay men and women who choose to learn what they need only from their favorite clergy. In this matter, we cannot lose sight of the neglect of the State who, until the other day, had a Ministry of Buddhist Affairs. We imagine that such a ministry should have been working not only with the papers on their office tables, but also in consultation with whoever is responsible for the ennobling continuance of the Sāsana of the Buddha, whatever meaning you give to that word. That we consider is the responsibility of the State or the Government. Under the new set-up, with a lesser role for the State to play, the Saṅgha of this country, as a collective whole, must step forward to put things right in various areas of activity under its jurisdiction.

It is our convinced opinion that the State must step in at this stage to restore in Sri Lanka the prestigious position which *aṭṭa-sīl*, as a twenty-four hour activity, enjoys all over the world in Theravāda Buddhist countries like Burma and Thailand. This, they must do in harmonious consultation with the Saṅgha leadership of all *Nikāyas* in this country. These certainly have to be the priorities in any Buddha Jayanti activity in this country.